
“Rip Van Winkle” (1819)

Washington Irving

Washington Irving (1783-1859)

- last of 11 children
 - lived from end of Revolutionary War to just before the Civil War
 - 1809: published parody *History of New York*, under the pseudonym Dietrich Knickerbocker; became celebrity (→ New York Knicks NBA team)
 - 1815: departed for Europe; away for 17 yrs.
 - 1819: *The Sketch Book*, including “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” both based on German folktales
-



Washington Irving (1783-1859)

- first American writer to be a big success in England
 - 1828: *The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*, research in Spain
 - 1829-32: diplomat in London
 - 1832-42: returns to U.S., builds home Sunnyside on Hudson River, New York
 - 1842-46: minister to Spain
 - 1851-59: 5 vol. life of George Washington
-

Sunnyside



Hudson River from Sunnyside



Vision vs. Reality (1)

- “Rip Van Winkle” is the classic American story of a man who finds his home life intolerable, and so escapes into a world of fantasy and vision
 - Even before Rip goes into the mountains and apparently falls asleep for 20 yrs., the story is divided between reality and fantasy/vision
-

Vision vs. Reality (2)

- Reality: Home life, under the rule of Dame Van Winkle
 - Farm: “most pestilent piece of ground in the whole country” (§8)
 - Children: “ragged and wild as if they belonged to nobody” (§9)
 - Wife: “continually dinning in his ears about his idleness, his carelessness, and the ruin he was bringing on his family” (§10)
-

Vision vs. Reality (3)

- Vision: Community anywhere outside the house
 - ❑ Playing with village children/telling stories (§6)
 - ❑ Minding “any body’s business but his own”; “an insuperable aversion to all kinds of profitable labour” (§7)
 - ❑ “frequenting a kind of perpetual club of the sages, philosophers, and other idle personages of the village” (§12)
 - ❑ Escaping into the woods with gun and dog Wolf (§15)
-

Vision vs. Reality: Rip's Journey

- Rip's Kaatskill experience extends his village "vision"
 - Escape from family responsibility
 - Dutch Drinking party: Male community, from past (Henry Hudson and men?)
 - Minding other people's business (§19)
 - Obedience and rebellion: 2 sides of Rip's character (§23)
-

Political Allegory (1)

- Upon waking, Rip finds himself in a different political system
 - Village inn → Union Hotel (§32)
 - King George → George Washington (§32)
 - People: “phlegm and drowsy tranquillity” → “busy, bustling, disputatious tone” (§33)
 - “ancient newspaper” → handbills (§33)
 - Nicholas Vedder dead; Brom Dutcher killed in war; Derrick Van Bummel in Congress

Political Allegory (2)

- “a knowing, self-important old gentleman” (¶34): a new political type
 - Interviews Rip
 - Leaves when crowd wants to take Rip’s gun (¶47)
 - Returns “when the alarm was over” (¶56)
 - The crowd imitates his gestures
-

Political Allegory (3)

- When Rip sees his son, “a precise counterpart of himself as he went up the mountain: apparently as lazy, and certainly as ragged. The poor fellow was now completely confounded. He doubted his own identity” (§45)
 - This scene portrayed by genre painter John Quidor, *The Return of Rip Van Winkle* (1829? 1849?)
-











ELECTION
RIGHTS
OF
CITIZENS
LIBERTY
BUNKER'S HILL

Political Allegory (4)

Rip stands for America's identity crisis as a new democracy:

“God knows. . . . I'm not myself—I'm somebody else—that's me yonder—no that's somebody else, got into my shoes—I was myself last night, but I fell asleep on the mountain, and they've changed my gun, and ever thing's changed, and I'm changed, and I can't tell what's my name, or who I am!” (§46)

Political Allegory (5)

- According to this allegorical reading, his wife stands for England: “there was one species of despotism under which he had long groaned, and that was—petticoat government” —“the tyranny of Dame Van Winkle (§60)
- Question: How do you respond to this notion of freedom as freedom from female domination?

Political Allegory (6)

- But “Rip, in fact, was no politician; the changes of states and empires made but little impression on him” (§60)
 - Thus, Rip is an anti-hero of the revolution, an anti-patriot, for whom politics makes little difference in daily life
 - Rip becomes a patriarch and “a chronicle of old times”—suggesting a society’s need for memory as well as revolution
-

Thomas Cole, *View of the Round-Top in the Catskill Mountains* (1827)



Thomas Cole, *Sunset in the Catskills* (1841)



Landscape as Symbol (1)

- Change: (¶3): “Every change of season, every change of weather, indeed, every hour of the day, produces some change in the magical hues and shapes. . .”
 - Memory: (¶3): “Whoever has made a voyage up the Hudson must remember the Kaatskill mountains”
 - Royalty: (¶3): “glow and light up like a crown of glory”
-

Thomas Cole, *The Clove, Catskills* (c. 1827)



Jasper Francis Cropsey, *Autumn - On the Hudson River* (1860)





Landscape as Symbol (2)

- Beauty (§16): “the lordly Hudson, far, far below him, moving on its silent but majestic course”
- Sublimity/Terror (§17): “a deep mountain glen, wild, lonely, and shagged, the bottom filled with fragments from the impending cliffs” (association with Dame Van Winkle)

Thomas Cole, *The Oxbow* (1836)



Landscape as Symbol (3)

- Rip cut off from world of vision, re-enters changed reality:
 - (¶24): “he found himself on the green knoll whence he had first seen the old man of the glen. . . . [T]he eagle was wheeling aloft, and breasting the pure mountain breeze”
 - (¶27): “but no traces of such opening remained. The rocks presented a high impenetrable wall over which the torrent came tumbling in a sheet of feathery foam”

Landscape as Symbol (4)

- Landscape suggests reality/permanence (as well as change) (§29) : “Surely this was his native village, which he had left but the day before. There stood the Kaatskill mountains—there ran the silver Hudson at a distance—there was every hill and dale precisely as it had always been”
-



Conclusion: What is “Rip Van Winkle” about?

- Tradition and change
 - American identity (German narrative transplanted to America)
 - The power of myth
 - The power of nature
 - Gendered dimension of American imagination
 - Domestic life vs. public life
-